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Improving the EU's local capacity building efforts in post-conflict environments

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Summary of the research findings

After the failures that accompanied UN interventions in the early 1990s, local capacity building (CB) and local ownership have become matters of concern for the international community. This interest in 'the local' stems from the fact that its inclusion is increasingly understood to be essential to successful peacebuilding, providing the crucial link in the search for effectiveness and legitimacy in international peacebuilding initiatives. CB programmes—including training activities, mentoring and advising, and the provision of equipment and large infrastructure—have become key to strengthening capabilities at the individual and organisational levels. But while CB has positively impacted some areas, success has been narrow and uneven.

EU-CIVCAP's DL 6.1 evaluates international efforts in CB in five geographical areas: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Ethiopia, Kosovo, Serbia and Somalia. Overall, the findings of the report highlight that CB programmes have been able to strengthen pockets of capacity in specific organisations and institutions, but they have done so in a manner that has not always been well coordinated with other donor activities or local priorities, and in an environment of wider political, economic and institutional weaknesses that have constrained their impact and on which they have been dependent. Given the scale of the challenge and the timescales over which such activities have taken place, it is perhaps not surprising that they have struggled to be transformative in nature. Yet, as discussed in this report, there are some marked differences between what the international community has been able to achieve in the Horn of Africa and the Western Balkans. The level of success has varied depending on the local context and the level of resources channelled into each of these cases, with the Western Balkans benefiting from a more intensive international intervention in the 1990s/2000s. The prospect of EU/NATO membership has also acted as a catalyst in the Balkans, though not without difficulties.

Despite the differences between the Western Balkans and the Horn of Africa, there was agreement among the report's interviewees about the extent to which international CB activities have occurred without local involvement at the levels of problem identification, project development and evaluation. This deficit has led to a 'thin' rather than 'thick' legitimacy amongst local actors, in the sense that the activities have been broadly accepted and often welcomed by a small section of elite local actors, even if they are not always seen to be successful in practice, nor to be particularly cognisant of local needs. The deficit has exacerbated the existing problems of relevance, duplication and sustainability. However, in the case of the Western Balkans, increasing capacities at the local level and more involvement of local civil society actors and regional cooperation has narrowed the gap between the rhetorical commitment to local ownership by international actors, and its implementation in practice. In the Horn of Africa, and particularly in the States of Somalia,¹ this gap remains to be filled. Overleaf is a set of recommendations to improve donors' CB programmes, specifically in EU programmes and missions.

¹ Somalia remains a contested political entity. The term 'States of Somalia' is used here to refer collectively to the entities of the Federal Republic of Somalia, the Republic of Somaliland and the Puntland State of Somalia.

Policy implications and recommendations

1. **Local context is key.** Where possible, external donors should engage meaningfully with local knowledge and interlocutors in determining the nature and scope of the challenge at hand. Local actors should be central to the planning, implementation and evaluation of EU projects and activities. By making this so, the EU and other donors could strive for ‘thick’ rather than ‘thin’ legitimacy in their programmes—in other words, projects must be acknowledged and accepted by the wider population rather than just a narrow subset of the local elites.
2. **CB is not well-served by a top-down, ‘cookie cutter’ approach that seeks to impose externally derived models of reform on diverse and complex local environments.** EU missions and operations should be informed by in-depth fact finding missions incorporating local expertise. Training of EU personnel should also touch upon issues of local ownership and should impart knowledge of the local context, including where possible language training. The EU should also give due consideration to the possibility of extending the duration of deployments.
3. **The ambition of donor programmes should be tailored to the resources available to support them.** There is a danger that grand claims to transformation will founder in the face of local challenges and insufficient donor funding to meet them, putting at risk the sustainability of the reforms. Donor credibility and legitimacy can be undermined if this happens. Feasibility and impact assessments should be carried out prior to and after the deployment of EU missions and operations, both by internal and external evaluators.
4. **‘Hard’ CB, in the sense of equipment and infrastructure that will endure, tends to be valued more highly by local recipients.** The implementation of the new initiative on ‘capacity building in support of security and development’ (CBSD) constitutes a key opportunity for the EU, but also a crucial test. Such activities must be accompanied by support and training for maintenance and upkeep if they are to be effective. Equipment provided should be suitable to the environment as well as the operating parameters and the technical skills of local actors.
5. **Beware the fallacy of ‘political will’.** Apparent absences of ‘political will’ generally mask real problems of politics, which should be understood and addressed on their own terms. There will be winners and losers in any process of reform. EU programmes and missions should consider how losers be incentivised and motivated to engage in the process of reform, or at least not to disrupt it. Importantly, the EU should consider ways in which the range of winners can be broadened. Stakeholder analysis of this sort should be factored into projects and should have appropriate time and resources allocated to it.



Photo: Mostar (University of Bristol/Gilberto Algar-Faria)

Further information

This policy briefing drew from research conducted on EU-CIVCAP's Deliverable 6.1, 'Evaluating international efforts on local capacity building'. This can be accessed online, free of charge, via our website at: https://eucivcap.files.wordpress.com/2017/05/eu-civcap_deliverable_6-1.pdf

The EU-CIVCAP project

The goals of preventing the outbreak of conflict and promoting sustainable peace remain a fundamental challenge to policymakers and analysts alike. The European Union and its member states require an adequate set of capabilities if they are to address this challenge in a timely and effective manner. EU-CIVCAP is a three-year Horizon 2020 project which will provide a comprehensive, comparative and multidisciplinary analysis of EU civilian capabilities for external conflict prevention and peacebuilding to identify 'the best civilian means to enhance these capabilities' and address existing shortfalls.

More specifically, this project has identified three inter-related objectives:

1. To assess EU civilian capabilities for external conflict prevention and peacebuilding.
2. To identify and document lessons learned and best practices in EU conflict prevention and peacebuilding.
3. To enhance future policy practice and research on EU conflict prevention and peacebuilding.



Photo: BiH (University of Bristol/Gilberto Algar-Faria)

The project will gather, synthesise, further develop and disseminate knowledge and learning on civilian conflict prevention and peacebuilding. This will be done through, inter alia, the development of a catalogue of lessons learned and best practices reports, the creation of an expert network, engagement through social media, and the organisation of dissemination events in different formats in this area.

Our partners

EU-CIVCAP is led by the University of Bristol and includes 11 other partners from across eight countries in Europe, including Aberdeen University, the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy, the Centre for European Policy Studies, Conciliation Resources, the EU Satellite Centre, the European Peacebuilding Liaison Office, Istituto Affari Internazionali, Maastricht University, Roskilde University, the Royal Danish Defence College and Transparency Solutions.

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